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**Precariousness and spaces  
in digital society**

# 31Lo sQuaderno



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# Territorial embeddedness and virtual connections of knowledge and creative workers in Milan

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Alessandro Gandini**

The paper discusses the relation between territorial embeddedness and virtual connections among knowledge and creative workers in Milan by challenging the idea that co-presence is crucial for interaction and that face-to-face (F2F) relations are essential for their success. Knowledge and creative workers are thus embedded in a wider “space”, that is not necessarily a physical one, but also virtual and ICT mediated. The literature on co-presence and interaction (particularly within the economic sphere) originates from Becker’s (1974) and Granovetter’s works (1983). The social mechanisms and internal relations of groups of professionals are explored by many authors that elaborate on the idea that, notwithstanding the technological improvements in mobility and communication, people still have to meet in person and that F2F interactions and physical proximity still matter (Scott 2000; Storper 2013). Both theoretical and empirical researches assign many functions to F2F interactions: notably, the functions performed cover different aspects of the job sphere, being them acknowledged as the most efficient means of communication, strong vehicles of creativity, information, knowledge and trust, and a way through which people can “be into the loop”, in order to have their reputation tested and screened.

Knowledge and creative industries are also characterised by being organised on nonstandard forms of employment based on temporary contracts and a growing diffusion of freelance work. This enhances the necessity of entertaining forms of interaction that maintain and manage professional contacts, social capital and the personal reputation across the network. The recruitment mechanisms in such a fragmented and individualized labour market are shaped by relations based on informal interaction (Lee 2011). Therefore, creative industries rely on a “project-based” culture founded on a logic of quality, rather than one based on recognition of time needed to fulfil the task (Christopherson 2008), together with free labour and the development of personal relations (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

Nevertheless, particularly thanks to the development of ICT, social media are increasingly at the heart of the recruitment processes, and they represent one of the privileged places where human resources managers and hirers look for information on possible candidates (Pais 2012). In this context it is even possible to calculate one’s reputation through algorithms, “likes”, “mentions” and “retweets”, up until more elaborate Online Reputation Systems which determine a “digitization of word of mouth” (Dellarocas, 2003) by which reputation becomes “visible and measurable” under certain conditions.

The literature about forms and functions of F2F interaction is thus challenged by works exploring the ICT impact on relations and communication, questioning the role of internet in

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reinforcing or diminishing the importance and frequency of F2F communication. Notwithstanding the development of ICT, many empirical researches proved that, despite replacing them, on-line communication intertwines with face-to-face one in maintaining ties and relationships: even in the digital creative economy there are many empirical evidences at testing the embeddedness of creative workers in urban environments (Pratt 2013)

Two forces are therefore at play: the agglomeration economy and the possibility of being connected on-line due to the improvements of the ICT. What seems to be questionable is

*Their job, in other words, is a contact sport. The relationships built with other workers in their filed or in related ones tend to form a network which is the basis of an exchange system where information and support circulate*

whether the cultural operators are still embedded in places or not, or, in other words, whether they rely exclusively on their face-to-face interactions, exclusively on their on-line communication means, or in a combination of the two ways of connection. Our hypothesis is

that F2F interactions are still crucial and that on-line interactions act as a multiplier of functions, but it cannot substitute them.

So, how do professionals in the creative and knowledge economy cope with the precariousness of their working conditions? What kind of relations characterise their job activities? Research (d'Ovidio 2010) suggests that the work of such professionals is all about being engaged in making and maintaining relationships, which requires direct and frequent interactions and therefore co-location of actors. The main demand of their job is to be in the city, constantly reachable and permanently available to meeting people who are part of the system or are engaged in the creative field.

No, you cannot [work elsewhere], I would like to live in the countryside, for example, but I cannot; you have to be here to meet people, your friends [...] you cannot stay away from Milan very long (Fashion designer)

Their job, in other words, is a contact sport. The relationships built with other workers in their filed or in related ones tend to form a network which is the basis of an exchange system where information and support circulate. The reciprocal recognition of professionals within the same network generates a virtuous circle where trust to co-workers has chances to be multiplied. Especially in those industries where activity is mainly organised on projects with free-lance operators collaborating together, trust and recognitions are crucial in order both to conclude projects and to gain new appointments.

However, this implies that creative and knowledge workers are subjected to aesthetic judgments which are volatile and not easily predictable, within unstable and highly competitive markets. In this sense interactions, although costly in terms of time and management, serve to develop trust-based relations that reduce risk and enable more efficient partnering in joint projects, thus increasing motivation in collaborative efforts. Nevertheless, as relationships are constantly renewed in the network, this practice of "network management" often resembles a closed loop, where it is difficult to enter, and where opportunities for collaboration arise as a result of a lengthy process of "reputation construction" via "getting known".

em or are engaged in the creative field.

You can do this job without knowing anybody, working with only few customer, but you'd never gain real success. [...] If you are out of this network it is very difficult for you to be smart: we never actually look for a work, never directly promote ourselves, never have an advertising campaign. Our customers are the

ones who seek us out because they already know who we are (Designer)

These dynamics of place-based interactions intertwine with the digital sphere as they get into the discussions on the contemporary forms of labour. Because of the extremely importance of reputation, workers have to confront with their own image on the Web, thus to integrate together the online and offline dimensions of interaction. The public dimensions of connections and shares become a proxy for the evaluation of knowledge, creativity and talent.

Facebook is a wonderful resource to link your own articles, but Twitter is more efficient as a whole. You know, in the end the number of followers you have, counts, if you have 100 people who follow you, or 1,000, it is evident you develop more interest around you, and that the one with 1,000 uses the tool better (. . .) How do you evaluate if an article is successful? From the number of comments, shares, likes, tweets. . . It's a silly thing, but it's the first thing you look at, and it's true, I have a return on the fact that my article is linked or shared a lot (Journalist)

At the same time, the presence on Twitter, the quality and quantity of connections and recommendations on LinkedIn, the quality of websites or blogs, generate positive word of mouth, which in turn reinforce face to face interactions – and viceversa. The place-based face-to-face interactions that developing among knowledge and creative workers is sidelined by an online dimension of interaction centred on practices of self-branding that are instrumental to generate word-of-mouth and the 'positive loop' that follows. In this sense digital interaction does not substitute for, rather integrates face-to-face dynamics, combining with them and enforcing their impact.

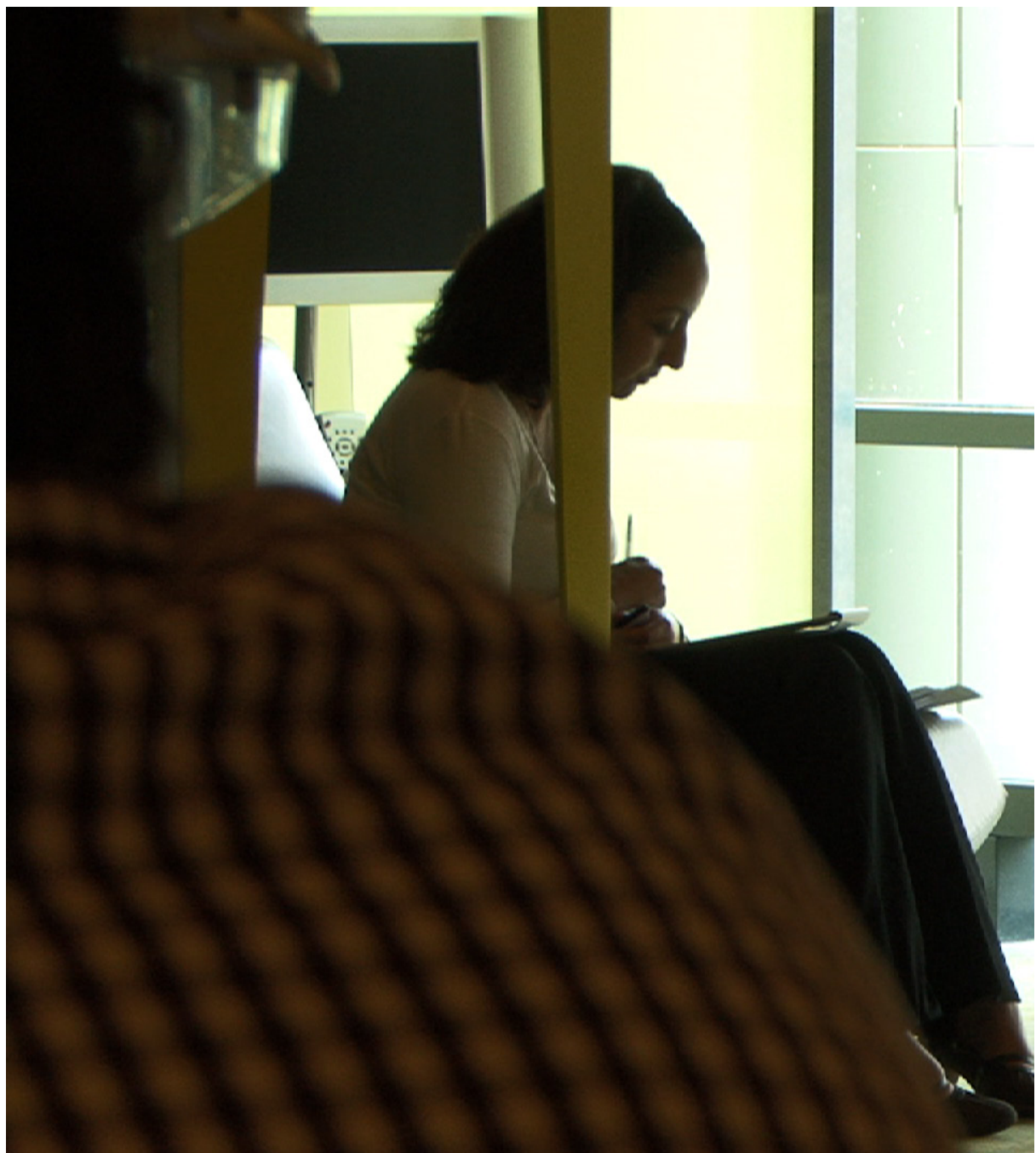
[ . . . ] there is an offline and an online word-of-mouth but these are correlated, and incentivize each other. Producing interesting content on my blog, on social media, creates a reputation and a word-of-mouth. My blog for instance helped me in emancipating from my dependent job, as I got in touch with a lot of people, something I could not do if I kept working for the same company (Social media/marketing consultant)

To conclude, it may be argued that actors inserted in territorial embedded networks have to play also within a wider space: the Web. Being active within both spaces intertwine and contribute to the acquisition of a status within the professional network, which is instrumental to the professional success. These specific dynamics of actions and interactions are necessary because of the "public" status of each actor. The worker is required to participate in highly relational contexts and to develop specific social skills in order to exploit the whole set of professional opportunities available within such environments. The combination of on-line and off-line dynamics is at the ground of a complex set of reputation mechanisms that become crucial in such a frame, characterised mainly by a self-branding culture.



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# squade